

Agnew Says U.S. Was Moving To Expand Sanctuary Areas

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U.S. forces were ordered across the Cambodian border last week because Communist troops were extending their long-existing sanctuaries there and trying to establish new supply lines to the sea, Vice President Agnew said yesterday.

Agnew's explanation, on the TV interview program "Face the Nation" (CBS, WTOP), added some detail to the rationale previously advanced by President Nixon and other officials.

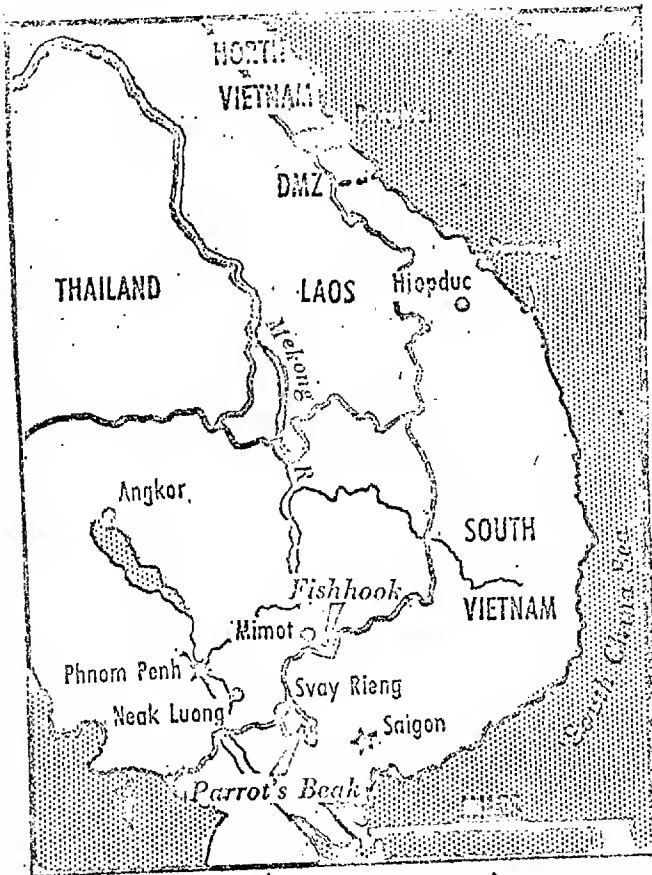
While Prince Norodom Sihanouk was in power in Cambodia, Agnew said, "the ability of the Communists to supply and build and extend the sanctuaries was marginal because there was a certain amount of regulation of the port of Sihanoukville."

Since Sihanouk's overthrow on March 18, "and even before that, there had been efforts to extend and consolidate and magnify the capabilities of these sanctuaries. . . . Now that the Communists are clearly trying to establish an unencumbered access to the sea, through which supplies can come to these sanctuaries in great quantity, we feel the security of American forces is seriously threatened," the Vice President said.

But Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, in a copyrighted interview published last night in the magazine U.S. News and World Report, rated such Cambodian supply routes as less important than the presence of the sanctuaries themselves.

"If the North Vietnamese were to control Cambodia, they would have free access to ports and beaches there, and could move supplies without restriction," Laird said.

But lack of such access would not be fatal to the enemy, he went on. "They could expand the use of overland routes through Laos. This would take longer and be inefficient, but they could do that."



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The town of Mimot in Cambodia has been under heavy allied air attack. The darkly shaded part of North Vietnam indicates area of new U.S. bombing.

"Hanoi, however, simply cannot fight the kind of war it is now fighting without Cambodian sanctuaries. Over the past two years, these sanctuaries have become increasingly important. They permitted Hanoi to largely control the casualty and loss rate of its forces. When Communist forces got too badly mauled in Vietnam, Hanoi could simply pull them back into Cambodia to rest, refit, pick up replacements and supplies and be readied to go back and fight again in South Vietnam at times and places of Hanoi's choosing," Laird said.

"Thus, if Cambodia were to be taken over by the Communists and Hanoi was able to use these sanctuaries without even the limited restraints that existed in previous years, we and the South Vietnamese would be faced with a serious threat to the Vietnamization program."

Agnew and Laird appeared to differ on Cambodia's capacity to resist a Communist takeover.

"There is no question in my mind that the North Vietnamese forces, if they were allowed to concentrate all their efforts against Cambodia, could probably defeat the Cambodian army," Laird said.

Agnew, stressing that "we have no responsibility to the Cambodians" and have "absolutely not" undertaken any obligation to defend the Lon Nol government in case the Communists move against its capital of Phnom Penh, said, "I assume that the Cambodians will take steps to protect their country."

Both Agnew and Laird portrayed the North Vietnamese as overextended and weakened.

"They have been in a war for years and years and they are quite debilitated and demoralized," Agnew said. "There has been a great diminution in their capability and in their activity in recent years."

Laird spoke of the 40,000 North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia as "tied down," and said "some observers feel Hanoi getting spread pretty thin, with such long supply lines."

The Laird interview, recorded early in the week and updated on Friday after the President's speech, was not specific on the Cambodian sanctuaries action. Agnew, in his television appearance yesterday, went into much more detail.

He disputed an interviewer's comment that similar operations in South Vietnam have failed to destroy enemy bases there.

"All we have done so far is sweep," Agnew said. "You can't do this with a sweep. Our troops are moving in, we are sweeping, we are then going to consolidate our positions and provide for our own security, and the latter days of this operation will be devoted entirely to a search and destruction of these installations. We have never done that before. . . . We have never attempted to destroy a headquarters or major installation such as this."

"We don't intend to take forever to complete this operation and we are going to send what force is necessary to do it," Agnew said. He disclosed that "we have other troops on standby" in case the 3,000 to 10,000 soldiers now attacking the sanctuaries are unable to finish the job within the eight-week period he called "the outside limit that was discussed" by the administration.

"The mistakes in the past," he said, "have been to some extent the fact that, in employing our forces, we have always utilized them in segments and fractions to meet the bare minimal requirements, which were constantly

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underestimated. The President didn't want to make that mistake here."

Secretary of State William P. Rogers, interviewed for a CBS news program on the Cambodian war last night, also stressed that the attack on the sanctuaries was "only going to last six to eight weeks . . . If this is going to last longer than eight weeks, I think there'd be serious doubt about it."

Agnew's statements drew immediate criticism from Democratic National Chairman Lawrence F. O'Brien that "the Nixon administration's action of the past week signifies a major escalation of the war in Indochina . . . the American policy of disengagement has ended."

Agnew's comments, O'Brien charged, point to "the establishment of a new front in Cambodia and a new, prolonged ground war which the Vice President himself admitted we could not win."

Agnew, insisting that the purpose of the Cambodian operation was consistent with the administration's goal of "complete withdrawal and separation from this conflict," had said it was "perfectly obvious" that the United States "can't win a ground war in Asia."

The lack of contact with the enemy in the first stages of the operation was no surprise, the Vice President said. "The expectation was that . . . the Communists, being surprised—as they were heavily surprised—would fall back, and that we would not encounter much in the way of enemy resistance in the early days and possibly, depending upon their capability to mount some kind of counteroffensive, none at all."

Rogers, on the other hand, said, "Well, we haven't, of course, encountered the opposition we thought we might."

"What we are trying to get at is facilities, not men," Agnew declared. "We are trying to destroy the capability, the logistical capability to mount offensives into South Vietnam."